

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA

JONAS ROBERT)
Plaintiff,) Civil Action No. 10 - 759
v.) District Judge David S. Cercone
BRIAN COLEMAN) Magistrate Judge Lisa Pupo Lenihan
Defendant.)
)

MAGISTRATE JUDGE'S REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

I. RECOMMENDATION

It is respectfully recommended that the Motion to Dismiss filed by Defendant Coleman (ECF No. 14) be granted.

II. REPORT

Plaintiff, Jonas Robert, an inmate presently incarcerated at the State Correctional Institution at Fayette, Pennsylvania, commenced this civil action pursuant to the Civil Rights Act of 1871, 42 U.S.C. § 1983, against Brian Coleman, Superintendent at SCI-Fayette alleging that his outgoing and incoming mail are being read in violation of his constitutional rights. Defendant filed a Motion to Dismiss the Complaint based on Plaintiff's failure to have exhausted his available administrative remedies as required by 42 U.S.C. §1997e(a). For the reasons that follow, this motion should be granted.

A. Standards of Review

Defendant has filed a Motion to Dismiss pursuant to Fed. R. Civ. Proc. 12(b)(6). With regard to this motion, the complaint must be read in the light most favorable to the plaintiff and all well-pleaded, material allegations in the complaint must be taken as true. Estelle v. Gamble, 429 U.S.

97 (1976). The court is bound to give the plaintiff the benefit of every reasonable inference to be drawn from the "well-pleaded" allegations of the complaint. Retail Clerks Intern. Ass'n, Local 1625, AFL-CIO v. Schermerhorn, 373 U.S. 746, 753 n. 6 (1963). A viable complaint must include "enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face." Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 554, 556 (2007) (rejecting the traditional 12 (b)(6) standard set forth in Conley v. Gibson, 355 U.S. 41, 45-46 (1957)). The court must accept as true all allegations of the complaint and all reasonable factual inferences must be viewed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Angelastro v. Prudential-Bache Securities, Inc., 764 F.2d 939, 944 (3d Cir. 1985). The Court, however, need not accept inferences drawn by the plaintiff if they are unsupported by the facts as set forth in the complaint. *See California Pub. Employee Ret. Sys. v. The Chubb Corp.*, 394 F.3d 126, 143 (3d Cir. 2004) (citing Morse v. Lower Merion School Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997)). Nor must the court accept legal conclusions set forth as factual allegations. Bell Atlantic Corp., 550 U.S. at 555 (citing Papasan v. Allain, 478 U.S. 265, 286 (1986)). "Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level." Bell Atlantic Corp., 550 U.S. at 555. Additionally, "a civil rights claim 'must contain specific allegations of fact which indicate a deprivation of constitutional rights; allegations which are nothing more than broad, simple and conclusory statements are insufficient to state a claim under § 1983.'" Coronado v. Goord, No. 99 Civ. 1674, 2000 WL 1372834, at *2 (S.D.N.Y. 2000) (quoting Alfaro Motors, Inc. v. Ward, 814 F.2d 883, 887 (2d Cir. 1987)).¹ It is not proper for the court to assume that "the [plaintiff] can prove facts

¹. *See also Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, ____ U.S. ___, 129 S.Ct. 1937, 1951 (U.S. 2009) (holding that, while the Complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, it must contain more than a "formulaic recitation of the elements" of a constitutional claim and must state a claim that is plausible on its face) (quoting Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007) and providing further guidance on the standard set forth therein).

which [he or she] has not alleged, or that the defendants have violated the ... laws in ways that have not been alleged." Associated General Contractors of California, Inc. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983).

Courts generally consider the allegations of the complaint, attached exhibits, and matters of public record in deciding motions to dismiss. Pension Benefit Guar. v. White Consol. Indus., Inc., 998 F.2d 1192, 1196 (3d Cir. 1993). Factual allegations within documents described or identified in the complaint also may be considered if the plaintiff's claims are based upon those documents. *Id.* (citations omitted). Moreover, a district court may consider indisputably authentic documents without converting a motion to dismiss into a motion for summary judgment. Spruill v. Gillis 372 F.3d 218, 223 (3d Cir.2004); In re Burlington Coat Factory Sec. Litig., 114 F.3d 1410, 1426 (3d Cir. 1997).

In addition, a court must employ less stringent standards when considering pro se pleadings than when judging the work product of an attorney. Haines v. Kerner, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972). In a § 1983 action, the court must liberally construe the pro se litigant's pleadings and "apply the applicable law, irrespective of whether a pro se litigant has mentioned it by name." Higgins v. Beyer, 293 F.3d 683, 688 (3d Cir. 2002) (quoting Holley v. Dep't of Veteran Affairs, 165 F.3d 244, 247-48 (3d Cir. 1999)). *See also* Nami v. Fauver, 82 F.3d 63, 65 (3d Cir. 1996) ("Since this is a § 1983 action, the [pro se] plaintiffs are entitled to relief if their complaint sufficiently alleges deprivation of any right secured by the Constitution.") (quoting Higgins, 293 F.3d at 688).

Finally, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has held that, in civil rights cases, a court must give a plaintiff the opportunity to amend a deficient complaint - regardless of whether the plaintiff requests to do so - when dismissing a case for failure to state a claim, unless

doing so would be inequitable or futile. *See Fletcher-Harlee Corp. v. Pote Concrete Contractors, Inc.*, 482 F.3d 247, 251 (3d Cir. 2007) (citing *Alston v. Parker*, 363 F.3d 229, 235 (3d Cir. 2004))

For the reasons set forth herein, it would be futile to allow Plaintiff the opportunity to file an amended complaint in this action.

B. Failure to Exhaust Administrative Remedies

Defendant asserts that the Complaint should be dismissed as to them due to Plaintiff's failure to have exhausted available administrative remedies as required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA), Pub. L. No. 104-134, 110 Stat. 1321 (1996). In this regard, in the PLRA, Congress amended the Civil Rights of Institutionalized Persons Act, 42 U.S.C.A. § 1997e, concerning suits by prisoners. Before the amendments, prisoners challenging the conditions of their confinement under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 were not required to exhaust administrative remedies before filing suit. The PLRA amended section 1997e(a), as follows, making exhaustion a mandatory requirement.

(a) Applicability of administrative remedies

No action shall be brought with respect to prison conditions under section 1983 of this title, or any other Federal law, by a prisoner confined in any jail, prison, or other correctional facility until such administrative remedies as are available are exhausted.

42 U.S.C. § 1997e(a), as amended.

The United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit analyzed the applicability of the exhaustion requirement in 42 U.S.C. § 1997e in *Nyhuis v. Reno*, 204 F.3d 65 (3d Cir. 2000) (Bivens action brought by a federal inmate) and *Booth v. Churner*, 206 F.3d 289 (3d Cir. 2000) (civil rights action brought by a state prisoner). In each of these cases, the Court of Appeals announced a bright line rule that inmate-plaintiffs must exhaust all available administrative remedies before they can file

an action in federal court concerning prison conditions. In so holding, the court specifically rejected the notion that there is ever a futility exception to section 1997e(a)'s mandatory exhaustion requirement. Booth, 206 F.3d at 300; Nyhuis, 204 F.3d at 66. A unanimous Supreme Court affirmed the Court of Appeals' holding in Booth v. Churner, 532 U.S. 731 (2001) where the Court confirmed that in the PLRA Congress mandated complete exhaustion of administrative remedies, regardless of the relief offered through those administrative procedures. In addition, in Porter v. Nussle, 534 U.S. 516 (2002), the Supreme Court clarified that the PLRA's exhaustion requirement applies to all inmate suits concerning prison life, whether they involve general circumstances or specific episodes and whether they allege excessive force or other conduct.

The available administrative remedies for Pennsylvania inmates are codified in the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Policy Statement No. DC-ADM 804-1, entitled "Consolidated Inmate Grievance Review System." *See, e.g.* Mitchell v. Horn, 318 F.3d 523 (2003) (discussing DOC Grievance System). The purpose of the grievance system is to ensure that every individual committed to DOC custody has access to a formal procedure through which the resolution of problems or other issues of concern arising during the course of confinement may be sought. The DOC grievance system applies to all state correctional institutions and provides three levels of review: 1) initial review by the facility grievance coordinator; 2) appeal of initial review to the superintendent or regional director; and 3) final appeal to the chief hearing examiner.

Inmate grievances must be in writing and in the format provided on the forms supplied by the institution. An initial grievance must be submitted by the inmate to the Facility Grievance Coordinator within fifteen (15) working days after the event upon which the claim is based. If the Facility Grievance Coordinator determines that the issue being grieved is in accordance with

DC-ADM 804, the Facility Grievance Coordinator designates a staff member to serve as the Grievance Officer for that issue. If the Facility Grievance Coordinator determines that the issue being grieved is not in accordance with DC-ADM 804, it is returned to the inmate unprocessed with a DC-804, Part 3, Grievance Rejection Form (Attachment C) enumerating the reason(s) the grievance was not accepted. The grievance, if resubmitted, must be resubmitted under the same grievance number within 5 working days. The Grievance Officer is required to provide a written response to the inmate within 10 working days of receipt of the grievance. An inmate may appeal an Initial Review decision to the Facility Manager in writing within 10 working days from the date of the Initial Review decision. The Facility Manager must notify the inmate of his/her decision within 10 working days of receiving the appeal. Any inmate who is dissatisfied with the disposition of an appeal from the Facility Manager may submit an appeal to the Secretary's Office of Inmate Grievances and Appeals within 15 working days from the date of the Facility Manager's decision. An inmate appealing a grievance to final review is responsible for providing the Secretary's Office of Inmate Grievances and Appeals with all required documentation relevant to the appeal. A proper appeal to final review shall include photocopies of the initial grievance, initial review response, the inmate appeal to the Facility Manager, and the Facility Manager's decision; failure to provide the proper documentation may result in the appeal being dismissed. The Secretary's Office will issue a decision within 30 working days after receipt of an appeal.

In the instant action, Defendant asserts Plaintiff failed to have exhausted his administrative remedies in that he failed to have completed the three-step grievance process provided for in DC-ADM 804 by failing to appeal any of his grievances to final review. Plaintiff does not dispute this assertion. The Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has held that a prisoner's failure to comply

with the procedural and substantive requirements of DOC's grievance policy, as set forth in DC ADM 804, results in procedural default, thereby precluding an action in federal court. *See Spruill v. Gillis*, 372 F.3d 218 (3d Cir. 2004). The United States Supreme Court adopted a similar holding in Woodford v. Ngo, 548 U.S. 81 (2006) wherein it held that an untimely or otherwise procedurally defective administrative grievance or appeal does not satisfy the PLRA's mandatory exhaustion requirement.

Because exhaustion requirements are designed to deal with parties who do not want to exhaust, administrative law creates an incentive for these parties to do what they would otherwise prefer not to do, namely, to give the agency a fair and full opportunity to adjudicate their claims. Administrative law does this by requiring proper exhaustion of administrative remedies, which "means using all steps that the agency holds out, and doing so properly (so that the agency addresses the issues on the merits)." This Court has described the doctrine as follows: "[A]s a general rule … courts should not topple over administrative decisions unless the administrative body not only has erred, but has erred against objection made at the time appropriate under its practice." Proper exhaustion demands compliance with an agency's deadlines and other critical procedural rules because no adjudicative system can function effectively without imposing some orderly structure on the course of its proceedings.

Woodford, 548 U.S. at 90-91 (internal citations, quotations and footnotes omitted).

The Court further noted that "[c]onstruing § 1997e(a) to require proper exhaustion also fits with the general scheme of the PLRA, whereas respondent's interpretation would turn that provision into a largely useless appendage. The PLRA attempts to eliminate unwarranted federal-court interference with the administration of prisons, and thus seeks to afford corrections officials time and opportunity to address complaints internally before allowing the initiation of a federal case." Woodard, 548 U.S. at 93. The Court concluded that the benefits of exhaustion could only be realized if the prison grievance system is given a fair opportunity to consider the claims, which required the

grievant to comply with the procedural rules. *Id.* at 94.

In the case at bar, Plaintiff procedurally defaulted his claims by failing to appeal the denial of his grievances within the mandatory time period. *See, e.g., Eakle v. Palakovich*, 200 Fed. Appx. 155, 156, 2006 WL 2917531, *1 (3d Cir. 2006); *Spruill v. Gillis*, 372 F.3d 218 (3d Cir. 2004). Given that Plaintiff has clearly failed to do so, and that he is now time-barred from rectifying his mistakes, it appears to this Court that Plaintiff, as a matter of law, cannot prevail in this suit. Furthermore, any opportunity afforded to Plaintiff to amend his complaint would be futile.

In the absence of any controlling authority to the contrary, this Court is required to follow the directives of the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit and, therefore, recommends to grant the Motion to Dismiss.

III. CONCLUSION

It is respectfully recommended that Defendant's Motion to Dismiss (ECF No. 14) be granted.

In accordance with the Magistrate Judges Act, 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1)(B) and (C), and Local Rule 72.1.4 B, the parties are allowed fourteen (14) days from the date of service to file written objections to this report. Any party opposing the objections shall have fourteen (14) days from the date of service of objections to respond thereto. Failure to timely file objections may constitute a waiver of any appellate rights.

October 18, 2010



Lisa Pupo Lenihan
U.S. Magistrate Judge

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